

I'm tired of sweet candy

"Guilt that keeps me alive, this clumsy head."

Est

The lobby of his building was empty when I arrived. The security guard recognized me now, nodded me through without asking for ID. I wondered if that meant something. If William had told them to let me pass, or if I'd simply become a familiar enough presence that they'd stopped questioning.

The elevator ride to the penthouse felt different this time. Before, it had felt like an ascent into a secret world, a private sanctuary where William and I existed outside of time. Now, the smooth hum of the machinery just felt like the gears of a corporate machine, lifting me up to a client meeting I hadn't agreed to. My reflection in the mirrored doors stared back at me—pale, dark circles under my eyes, camera bag digging into my shoulder. I looked like the hired help.

When the doors slid open, the hallway was silent. I didn't knock. I pressed the buzzer, the harsh electronic sound echoing in the corridor.

The words circled in my head, sharp-edged and dangerous. But underneath them was something softer, something I was afraid to voice: I thought I mattered to you. Did I imagine it?

The door was open, just like he'd said.

I stood in the hallway for a moment, my hand hovering over the handle, trying to steady my breathing. The familiar scent of linseed oil and turpentine drifted through the gap but it was overlaid with something cleaner. Lemon polish. Fresh laundry.—paint thinner and something else, something clean and sharp that hadn't been there before. New. Different.

I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The apartment had changed. Not dramatically—the bones were the same. The high ceilings, the wall of windows, the canvases stacked against every available surface. But there was an order to it now that hadn't existed before. The chaos had been curated. The paint supplies were organized in neat rows on a new shelving unit. The floor had been cleaned—actually cleaned, not just swept around the edges. And everywhere, everywhere, there were new paintings. Finished ones, framed and waiting. Works in progress, arranged on easels in various stages of completion.

The weight of it hit me immediately. This wasn't the apartment of a man who'd given up. This was a workspace. A professional studio. The lair of an artist preparing for something significant.

He'd been busy while he was silent.

William stood in front of the big window, silhouetted against the morning light, exactly like the first day I'd come here. For a disorienting moment, I felt time fold in on itself—the memory of that initial meeting layered over this one, the hope I'd carried then ghosting through the resignation I carried now.

He turned when he heard me enter.

And that was the first thing that hit me. A sharp slap to the chest.

He looked good. Not just functional—good. He wasn't in his paint-stained pajamas, the ones he'd lived in for months. He was wearing pressed trousers, dark and well-fitted, and a linen shirt the color of cream. His hair was washed, styled even, falling across his forehead in deliberate waves. His face had color. His eyes were clear.

He looked like a man who was functioning. A man who was preparing for a solo exhibition. A man who had his life together. A man who had moved on.

The realization landed somewhere between my ribs, sharp and precise.

I felt a sudden, irrational spike of anger. He looked whole. While I felt like I was walking around with my insides on the outside.

I swallowed it down. I was a professional.

"Est." His voice was neutral. Professional. "Thank you for coming."

Thank you for coming. As if I were a delivery person. As if I hadn't spent weeks wondering why he'd stopped talking to me.

His face was composed. The dark circles under his eyes were concealed, or maybe gone. He looked at me, and his expression was polite. Guarded.

"Of course." I heard myself say. "It's the job."

Something flickered in his expression—too fast to read—and then it was gone. He gestured toward the main studio area, where an easel had been set up with a canvas I didn't recognize.

"I've prepared the space. Let me know if you need anything moved."

I nodded, not trusting my voice, and started unpacking my equipment. The work was automatic. Muscle memory taking over while my mind spun in useless circles.

I started unpacking immediately. It was a defense mechanism. If my hands were busy with stands and light meters and diffusers, they couldn't shake. If my eyes were focused on Kelvin temperatures and ISO settings, they couldn't search his face for a sign of the person who had kissed me.

Tripod: extended, locked, positioned near the window to catch the natural light.

Camera: mounted, settings checked, lens cap removed.

Light meter: readings taken at various points around the room.

The numbers helped. The technical focus helped. As long as I was thinking about f-stops and shutter speeds, I didn't have to think about the way William was watching me. Or not watching me. Or whatever he was doing over there by the easel, his body angled away like he couldn't quite bear to face me directly.

The air felt heavy. Thick with everything we weren't saying.

I turned on the portable LED panels I'd brought, adjusting their angle to supplement the window light. The room shifted from cool morning tones to something warmer, more dimensional. Better for portraits. Better for capturing the subtle variations in shadow that the mood board had emphasized.

I moved the reflector, adjusting the angle to bounce the morning sun. The air felt heavy and uncomfortable, a physical weight pressing against my skin. I could feel him watching me, but not in the way he used to. He wasn't observing me like I was a muse; he was watching me like I was a technician servicing his boiler.

"Everything okay?"

William's voice made me jump. I hadn't heard him move, but he was closer now, leaning against the easel with his arms crossed. He wasn't looking at me. He was looking at the floor.

"Yeah." I lied. "Just checking the light."

"It's fine." His tone was flat. Final. "You always get the light right."

The compliment should have warmed me. Instead, it felt like a dismissal. You're good at your job. Do your job. Don't ask questions.

"Right." I muttered.

I picked up the camera. The weight of it was familiar, grounding. I brought the viewfinder to my eye.

William stiffened. Just a little—a micro-expression that someone who hadn't spent weeks studying his face might have missed. His shoulders drew up slightly. His jaw tightened. The body language of a man bracing for something unpleasant.

Click.

The shutter sound was the only noise in the room.

Whir. Click.

Mechanical. Cold. The sound of a transaction.

I checked the preview screen. The composition was good—William framed by the window, the city sprawling behind him, his expression carefully neutral. Technically proficient. Emotionally empty.

Exactly what the client wanted, probably.

I lowered the camera, adjusting the aperture for a shallower depth of field. "Turn your head slightly to the left."

He complied, silent.

"Yeah, like that." I raised the camera again. "Look at the canvas, not me."

Another micro-shift. His jaw tightening a fraction more—the way it did when he was forcing a pose instead of finding it naturally. He was wearing that grey sweater I liked, the one that made his eyes look like storm clouds. I hadn't noticed it before, too distracted by the pressed trousers and the linen shirt. But he must have changed at some point, slipping into something more comfortable for the actual work.

He looked beautiful. He looked miserable.

Click.

"Good." I said. My voice sounded professional. Distant. Someone else's voice entirely. "That's good."

We continued like that for nearly an hour.

I directed; he obeyed. I clicked; he posed. We spoke only in technical terms—move here, look there, turn slightly, hold that—and the space between us grew heavier with each passing minute. The stack of captured images grew, and I knew without reviewing them that they were technically excellent and utterly soulless.

This wasn't collaboration. This was extraction.

I was pulling images from him like a dentist pulling teeth, and he was letting me, his compliance a kind of passive resistance. You want photographs? Here. Take them. Take everything you need and leave.

The frustration built slowly, a pressure behind my sternum.

I switched to the 85mm lens for tighter portraits. Moved closer. The change in proximity made William's discomfort more visible—the slight twitch of his fingers, the way his gaze kept sliding away from the camera.

I moved a few steps to the left. William's eyes tracked the lens, not me.

"I need you to relax your shoulders." I said. "You're holding tension in your neck."

He exhaled, forcing his shoulders down. It didn't look natural. It looked like a puppet having its strings cut.

It was excruciating. The silence wasn't the companionable quiet we used to share; it was a void. Every command I gave felt like I was barking orders at a stranger. Every compliance from him felt like a resignation.

But the photos were... technically fine. They were sharp. The lighting was dramatic. He looked like the brooding, enigmatic artist the magazine wanted.

But they were empty.

They were lies.

And I knew, looking at the small digital screen, that I couldn't turn these in. They lacked the soul he had shown me. They lacked the "Absence & Light" he was trying to convey. They were just Absence.

"It's not working," I muttered, more to myself than him.

William flinched. "What?"

I lowered the camera. "The energy is flat. It looks staged."

"It is staged, Est." he said, his voice tight. "That's what a photoshoot is."

"No. It's supposed to be honest." I walked closer to him, swapping my lens for the 50mm. I needed to get in his personal space. I needed to break through the linen shirt and the styled hair. "We need something raw. The mood board said 'new concepts.' This just looks like a corporate headshot."

"I'm doing what you asked."

"You're hiding." I said. The professional filter was slipping. I was too tired, too hurt to keep it perfectly in place. "You're standing there, but you're not there."

William's eyes flashed. "I'm right here."

"Then show me." I raised the camera again. I was close now, maybe three feet away. "Don't look at the canvas. Look at the lens. Look at me."

The change in proximity made William's discomfort more visible—the slight twitch of his fingers, the way his gaze kept sliding away from the camera.

"Can you look at me for this one?"

He looked. But not at me—at the lens. At the mechanical eye between us. His

expression was closed, guarded, giving nothing.

Click.

"William." My voice cracked slightly. I cleared my throat, tried again. "I need something more here. The client wants warmth. Connection. Can you give me—"

"I'm giving you what I have."

The words were quiet, but they landed like stones.

I lowered the camera. "That's not—"

"What do you want from me, Est?" He was still leaning against the easel, but his posture had shifted. Tenser. Coiled. "I'm here. I'm cooperating. I'm doing exactly what you asked. What more do you need?"

"I need you to be here." The words escaped before I could stop them. "Not just physically. Actually present. Actually engaged. I can't capture something that isn't there."

"Maybe there's nothing to capture."

"That's not true and you know it."

Something flickered in his eyes—anger, maybe, or pain, or both tangled together. "You don't know what's true. You don't know anything about—"

"About what?" I cut him off, the frustration finally boiling over. "About you? About what you're feeling? You're right, I don't. Because you won't tell me. You just disappear for weeks, send formal emails through your agent, and then expect me to show up and pretend nothing happened?"

"This is a professional engagement." His voice was tight, controlled. "I hired you to take photographs. That's all."

"That's all?" I laughed, and it came out harsh, bitter. "That's really what you're going with? After everything?"

"After what, Est?" He pushed off from the easel, his arms uncrossing, his hands clenching at his sides. "After one date? After a few phone calls? We barely know each other."

The words were a blade, and he wielded them with precision.

"You kissed me." My voice was barely a whisper. "You painted me. You said you didn't want to be alone anymore. That wasn't nothing."

"It was a mistake."

Silence.

The word hung in the air between us, brutal and final.

I felt something inside me crack—not break, not yet, but crack. A fissure running through the careful composure I'd built up all morning.

"A mistake." I repeated.

William's expression faltered. Something like regret flashed across his features, there and gone. "I didn't mean—"

"Yes, you did." I set the camera down on the tripod, my hands suddenly unsteady. "You meant every word. That's the problem, isn't it? You meant it when you kissed me. You meant it when you said you wanted something different. And then you got scared, so now you're pretending none of it was real."

"You don't understand—"

"Then help me understand!" My voice rose, cracking on the final word. "I've been trying, William. I've been patient and understanding and professional and everything you seemed to need. But I can't keep doing this—showing up, being present, giving everything I have—while you treat me like I'm just another service provider."

"That's not fair."

"Neither is silence." I took a step toward him, then stopped, suddenly aware of how close we were. Close enough to see the rapid pulse at his throat. Close enough to see the way his breathing had gone shallow. "Neither is finding out about your exhibition from your agent. Neither is being shut out every time I try to get close."

William looked away. His jaw was tight, his shoulders rigid. The posture of a man under siege.

"I told you." he said quietly. "I need to protect myself."

"From what? From me?" I spread my hands, helpless. "I'm not trying to hurt you. I'm trying to love you. But you keep making that impossible."

The word landed between us like a bomb.

Love.

I hadn't meant to say it. Hadn't even fully admitted it to myself. But there it was, exposed and vulnerable and impossible to take back.

William's head snapped toward me, his eyes wide.

"You—" He stopped. Swallowed. Started again. "You can't."

"Can't what? Love you?" I laughed again, but this time it sounded more like a sob.

"Too late. It's already happened. It was probably happening before the first date, if I'm being honest. Every time you let me see something real, every time you trusted me with a piece of yourself—I fell a little more."

"I never asked you to—"

"No, you didn't. You never ask for anything, do you? You just take what's offered and then retreat before anyone can expect anything in return."

His face twisted—pain, anger, something raw and complicated. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Then tell me!" I stepped closer, close enough to touch him if I reached out. I didn't.

"Tell me what's going on. Tell me why you pulled away. Tell me what I did wrong, or what you're afraid of, or whatever it is that's making you—"

"Est, stop."

The words exploded out of him, too loud for the quiet room. They echoed off the high ceilings, sharp and jagged.

I froze.

William stood there, chest heaving, his composure finally shattered. His hands were shaking—I could see the tremor from where I stood. His eyes were bright, overbright, and for a horrifying moment I thought he might cry.

"No. We have a job to do." I took a step closer. "You want to sell this exhibition? You want people to feel something? Then you have to feel something first."

"I am feeling something." he grit out.

"What? Annoyance? Indifference?" I snapped another photo. The flash didn't fire, but the shutter sounded like a gunshot. "Give me the guy who painted the charcoal portrait. Give me him."

"He's not here." William said, his voice rising.

"Where is he? Did you lock him away with everything else?"

"I said stop!"

William moved. It was a sudden, violent jerk of motion. He swiped his hand through the air as if swatting away a fly, but his knuckles connected hard with the edge of the reflector stand I'd set up.



The stand wobbled, tipped, and crashed to the floor with a deafening metallic clang.

The noise shattered the room.

William stood there, chest heaving, his hand curled into a fist against his chest, cradling it. His eyes were wide, the composure completely gone, the linen shirt suddenly looking like a costume on a frantic child.

"I can't!" he yelled, the sound tearing out of his throat. "I can't do this! I can't look at you and pretend I'm not bleeding! I can't stand here and let you look at me like that when I know I ruined it!"

He spun away from me, grabbing the nearest thing—a jar of paint brushes—and hurled it across the room. It smashed against the far wall, brushes scattering like shrapnel, a splatter of blue paint staining the pristine white plaster.

"Get out!" he screamed, his back to me, his shoulders shaking violently. "Take your camera and just... get out!"

I stood frozen, the camera hanging heavy from my neck, the echo of the crash still ringing in my ears.

The disaster wasn't the photo. The disaster was us.

The hallway was silent.

The kind of silence that rings in your ears after a gunshot. Or a door slamming.

I stood there, my back against the wall opposite William's door, staring at the polished wood like it might offer some explanation. Some apology. Some sign that the last hour hadn't actually happened the way I remembered it.

The door stayed closed.

I stood there, staring at the wood grain of William's door.

My camera hung from my shoulder, the strap cutting into my neck. I'd grabbed it on the way out—instinct, muscle memory, the automatic motion of a photographer protecting his equipment. Everything else was still inside. The tripod. The LED panels. The reflectors and diffusers and backup batteries. All the careful preparation, abandoned in the wreckage of whatever that had been.

Probably a piece of my dignity, too.

I didn't knock. I didn't call out. I just stood there, my hand hovering near the wood but never touching it, my breath coming in shallow, ragged gasps.

I didn't remember leaving. One moment we'd been standing there, hands intertwined, something fragile and hopeful building between us. The next—The next, he'd pulled away. His expression had shuttered, all that raw vulnerability disappearing behind a wall I couldn't climb. He'd said something about needing me to go. His voice had been cold. Controlled. The voice of a man retreating into his fortress and pulling up the drawbridge behind him.

Get out!

Two words. That's all it had taken to undo everything.

I'd tried to argue. Tried to remind him of what he'd just admitted—that he wanted to try, that he was scared, that he didn't want to lose me. But he'd already been gone, his body present but his eyes empty, and every word I said seemed to push him further away.

In the end, I'd left because staying felt worse. Because watching him disappear while standing right in front of me was a particular kind of torture I couldn't endure. And now I was here. In the hallway. Alone.

Inside, there was no sound. No more crashing. No shouting. Just the terrifying quiet of a storm that had spent itself and left wreckage in its wake.

I didn't know how long I stood there.

Time had gone strange, elastic and meaningless. The light from the window at the end of the hall shifted from gold to white to something grayer, but I couldn't have said whether that meant minutes or hours. My legs ached. My shoulders ached. Everything ached.

Ten minutes? An hour? The concept of time felt slippery, irrelevant. My legs ached, but I couldn't make them move toward the elevator. Leaving felt final. Leaving meant accepting that the man who had kissed me, the man who had painted me, had just screamed at me to get out like I was a stranger he hated.

At some point, I slid down the wall until I was sitting on the floor, my knees drawn up, my camera resting in my lap. The carpet was expensive—thick and soft, the kind that cost more per square foot than my monthly rent. I stared at the pattern without seeing it.

A mistake.

He'd called it a mistake. Everything between us—the portrait, the kiss, the late-night conversations where he'd let me see pieces of himself he'd hidden from everyone else. All of it. A mistake.

And then, minutes later, he'd said he wanted to try.

And then, minutes after that, he'd kicked me out.

I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes until I saw stars. The pressure helped, somehow. Gave the pain somewhere physical to live instead of just echoing endlessly in my chest.

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

The vibration made me jump, a jolt of electricity through my numb body.

The sound was distant, muffled by the leather of my jacket pocket. I ignored it. Then it buzzed again. And again. A pattern that suggested a notification, not a call.

I pulled it out with numb fingers.

New Email: Agency Management

Subject: Session Cancellation / Rescheduling

My heart hammered against my ribs. Was it William? Had he—

For a stupid, desperate moment, my heart leaped. Maybe it was William. Maybe he'd realized what he'd done, asked his manager to reach out, was trying to fix things through the only channel he knew how to use—

I opened the email.

To: Est Supha Sangaworawong

Subject: RE: Photography Session – Rescheduling Required

Dear Est,

I hope this message finds you well. I'm writing to follow up on today's session at Mr. Jakrapatr's studio.

On behalf of William Jakrapatr, we would like to apologize for the sudden termination of today's session. The artist is experiencing a personal health matter and is unable to continue.

Your remaining equipment will be returned via courier tomorrow morning. We will reach out regarding rescheduling a future session at a more appropriate time.

It has come to my attention that the session was unable to be completed as scheduled. I sincerely apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused. Please rest assured that your equipment and personal belongings will be returned to you tomorrow morning.

Regarding the remaining deliverables for the "Absence & Light" exhibition, we would

like to propose rescheduling the session for a future date. Mr. Jakrapatr's team is currently reviewing options and will be in touch within the next two weeks to confirm availability.

Your professionalism and patience are greatly appreciated during this time.

Thank you for your understanding and discretion.

Regards.

Jakrapatr Creative Holdings.

A personal health matter.

Discretion.

Courier.

The words blurred. It was so clean. So sterile. So incredibly efficient at erasing the raw, bloody mess that had just happened in that room.

William hadn't sent it. He hadn't texted. He'd called his manager. He'd hidden behind the machinery of his career to push me away one last, definitive time.

I lowered the phone.

"A personal health matter." I whispered to the empty hallway.

The laugh that bubbled up my throat was wet and jagged. It sounded crazy.

I read the email three times.

The words were professional. Polished. Carefully constructed to convey information without revealing anything. The session was unable to be completed. As if it had been a scheduling conflict. A technical difficulty. A minor inconvenience to be smoothed over with apologies and promises of rescheduling. Not a word about what had actually happened. Not a hint that anything personal had transpired at all.

I looked at the door one last time. I remembered the first day I'd stood here, nervous but hopeful. I remembered the day he'd opened it with paint in his hair and a shy smile. I remembered walking out of here feeling like I was floating, like the world had suddenly expanded to include color I hadn't known existed.

Now, it was just a door. A barrier.

I was a fool.

Tui had warned me. Hong had warned me. My own gut had warned me. But I'd

wanted to believe. I'd wanted to be the exception to his rule of absence.

Instead, I was just another casualty.

Your equipment and personal belongings will be returned to you tomorrow morning.

Like I was a vendor who'd left behind a dolly. Like the tripod and LED panels were the only things that mattered.

We would like to propose rescheduling the session for a future date.

I lowered the phone.

The hallway was still silent. The door was still closed. And I was still sitting on the floor like an idiot, waiting for something that wasn't coming.

I don't know what I expected.

For him to open the door? To come after me, breathless and apologetic, the way people did in movies? To realize that pushing me away was a mistake—a real mistake, not the kind he'd accused our entire connection of being?

I was a fool.

A fool for coming here this morning with my heart on my sleeve and my camera bag full of hope. A fool for thinking that Tui's advice and a good night's sleep could prepare me for this. A fool for believing, even for a moment, that William's admission of fear meant he was ready to stop running.

He wasn't ready.

Maybe he never would be.

And I was the one left sitting in a hallway, reading a professional email that reduced everything between us to a scheduling inconvenience.

I forced myself to stand.

My legs protested—stiff from sitting, weak from the adrenaline crash. I braced one hand against the wall and pulled myself upright, my camera swinging heavily against my hip.

The door was still there. Closed. Silent.

I stared at it.

Behind that door, William was probably doing what William always did—retreating into his art, his isolation, his carefully constructed fortress of solitude. Maybe he was painting. Maybe he was staring out the window at the city, preferring its cold beauty

to the messy warmth of human connection. Maybe he was regretting everything he'd said, every crack he'd let me see.

Or maybe he'd already forgotten I existed.

Maybe I was just another person who'd gotten too close, another threat to be neutralized, another name to add to the list of people he'd pushed away before they could leave on their own.

Everyone leaves.

That's what he'd said. As if it were an immutable truth. As if he hadn't noticed that he was the one doing the leaving, over and over again, slamming doors in people's faces and then wondering why he was alone.

I wanted to be angry.

I wanted to pound on the door and demand he face me. Demand he explain how he could go from I want to try to please leave in the space of a heartbeat. Demand he acknowledge that I was a person, not a problem to be managed by his team.

But I was too tired.

Too hurt.

Too empty.

I picked up my bag. It felt heavier than ever, the straps digging into my shoulder. I turned away from the door and walked toward the elevator.

My boots felt like lead. My chest felt like it had been hollowed out with a scoop.

Everything hurt. My eyes burned, but I refused to cry here. Not in his building. Not where the security cameras could see me. Not where he might open the door and catch me breaking.

The elevator arrived with a cheerful ding. I stepped inside and watched the doors slide shut, sealing me in, cutting off the view of his hallway.

The elevator ride down was interminable.

Seventeen floors of silence, the same mechanical hum as before, the same shifting numbers. But everything felt different. This morning, I'd been nervous but hopeful. Now I felt hollow, scraped out, a shell of the person who'd walked through the lobby with his camera bag and his carefully chosen outfit and his fragile, stupid optimism.

As the car descended, dropping me back down to the ground, back to reality, the only thought circling my mind was a simple, devastating realization:

He didn't fight for me. He fought against me.

And I had lost.

The security guard nodded at me as I passed. I didn't nod back.

Outside, the city assaulted me with noise and light and movement. Traffic. Pedestrians. The ordinary chaos of a world that didn't know or care that my heart had just been shattered in a penthouse apartment seventeen floors above.

I walked.

I didn't know where I was going. My feet moved without input from my brain, carrying me down streets I didn't recognize, past buildings I didn't see. My camera was still hanging from my shoulder, banging against my hip with every step. I should have put it in the bag. I should have protected it.

I couldn't bring myself to care.

I ended up on a bench somewhere.

A park, maybe. Or a plaza. There were trees and a fountain and people walking dogs, but the details didn't register. I sat down heavily, my hands hanging between my knees, and stared at the ground.

The email was still open on my phone. I could feel its weight in my pocket, that professional dismissal sitting there like an accusation.

Your professionalism and patience are greatly appreciated during this time.

I laughed. The sound came out broken, more sob than humor.

Professional. Patient. That's what I'd tried to be. That's what Tui had advised—show up, do the work, let your talent speak for itself. And I had. I'd walked in there with my equipment and my carefully prepared shot lists and my determination to keep things clean, keep things separate, keep the personal and the professional in their respective boxes.

But William had never been someone I could keep in a box.

From the first moment I'd seen him—silhouetted against that window, paint on his fingers, isolation wrapped around him like a cloak—I'd known he was going to matter. I'd known he was going to take up space in my chest that I couldn't afford to give away.

And I'd let him anyway.

I'd let him see me. Really see me. I'd let him paint my soul on canvas and kiss me like I was precious and tell me he didn't want to be alone anymore.

And then I'd let him break my heart.

The sun moved across the sky.

Shadows lengthened. The park—it was a park, I realized eventually—began to empty as the afternoon wore on. Families packed up their picnic blankets. Dog walkers headed home. The fountain kept running, indifferent to human drama.

I should call Tui.

The thought surfaced from somewhere deep, a survival instinct kicking in. Tui would know what to say. Tui would make hot chocolate and let me cry on his couch and tell me that I deserved better, that William's inability to show up wasn't a reflection of my worth, that I would survive this.

I pulled out my phone.

But instead of calling, I just stared at the screen. At the email from William's manager. At the last text exchange with William himself, from this morning.

Door will be open.

It had been open. And then it had closed.

And I was on the wrong side of it.

The tears came eventually.

I didn't try to stop them. There was no one around to see, and even if there had been, I was too exhausted to care about dignity. I sat on that bench and cried—ugly, heaving sobs that shook my whole body—and let the grief wash through me.

It wasn't just William.

It was everything. Every person who'd ever looked at me and seen something too much, too intense, too needy. My father, turning cold when he learned who I really was. The friends who'd drifted away when my life got complicated. The clients who used my eye without ever learning my name. And now William. Who'd seen me—really seen me—and decided that what he saw wasn't worth the risk.

A mistake.

Maybe he was right. Maybe all of it had been a mistake. Maybe I should have kept my distance, maintained my professionalism, never let myself believe that a reclusive artist with a three-year isolation streak was capable of letting someone in.



But I had believed. I had hoped.

And now I was paying the price.

My phone buzzed again.

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand and looked at the screen, expecting another formal email, another professional dismissal.

Tui: You've been gone a long time. Everything okay?

I stared at the message. Such a simple question. Such an impossible answer.

Me: No.

The reply came immediately.

Tui: Coming to get you. Where are you?

I looked around, finally registering my surroundings. A small park near the river. A fountain with a statue of some historical figure I didn't recognize. A bench under a tree that was just starting to lose its leaves.

Me: I don't know. Some park. Near the water.

Tui: Send me your location. Don't move.

I did as he asked. Then I put my phone away and sat there, waiting, my camera still hanging heavy from my shoulder.

The sun was setting now, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink. It was beautiful. I should have photographed it.

I didn't move. I just sat there, watching the light change, and tried to remember how to breathe.

Tui found me twenty minutes later.

He didn't say anything at first. Just sat down on the bench beside me, close enough that our shoulders touched, and waited.

The silence stretched between us, but it was a different kind of silence than the one in William's hallway. This one was warm. Patient. The silence of someone who wasn't going anywhere.

"He kicked me out," I said finally. My voice was hoarse from crying. "We were—I thought we were getting somewhere. And then he just... shut down. Told me to leave."

Tui nodded slowly. "I'm sorry."

"His manager sent an email." I laughed again, that same broken sound. "Apologizing for the inconvenience. Promising to return my equipment. Like it was a business transaction that went sideways."

"It was never just business."

"No." I leaned my head back, staring up at the darkening sky. "It never was."

Tui was quiet for a moment. Then he stood up and offered me his hand.

"Come on." he said. "Let's go home."

I looked at his hand. At his face, steady and patient and real.

And I took it.

The walk back to the studio was long, but Tui didn't rush me. He matched his pace to mine, stayed close without crowding, let me be silent when I needed silence and talked when I needed distraction.

By the time we reached Ink & Ashes, the sky was fully dark and my legs were aching. throbbing pulse that had nothing to do with physical exertion and everything to do with the weight of the day.

But I was still standing.

I was still here.

The place was already closed; the neon sign was dead, the metal grate pulled down. There wasn't a soul in sight on the street, just the distant, indifferent hum of the city.

The studio was silent, locked up tight for the night. No buzzing of tattoo machines, no soft murmur of client consultations, no scratch of Hong's pencil against paper. Just the familiar storefront with its neon sign switched off, the windows reflecting the streetlights back at us like dark mirrors.

Tui fished his keys from his pocket and unlocked the side door that led directly up to his apartment. The stairs creaked in their usual places—third step, seventh step, the warped landing—and I followed him up on autopilot, my body moving without conscious input.

At the top, he paused with his hand on the doorknob.

"How about a sleepover tonight?" Tui asked, tossing his keys into the bowl by the

door. He didn't look at me, giving me the dignity of not having to hide my face.

The question was casual, easy, like he was suggesting we grab coffee instead of offering me a lifeline. It had been a long time since we'd spent the night together like this—not crashing because of work or a party. But I knew what he was really asking. Are you okay to be alone? Do you need someone to watch over you? Will you fall apart if I let you go home to that empty apartment?

The answer to all three was probably yes.

"Okay." I said. My voice sounded strange to my own ears—flat, exhausted, scraped raw. "Yeah. That sounds good."

Tui smiled, small and warm, and opened the door.

It had been a long time since we'd spent the night together.

Back then, Tui's couch had been my refuge, his apartment the only safe harbor in a world that had suddenly turned hostile. We'd stayed up late watching bad movies, eating instant noodles, talking about everything and nothing until exhaustion pulled us under.

That felt like a lifetime ago. A different Est. A different kind of hurt.

But Tui's apartment was the same. Still small, still cluttered, still smelling faintly of sandalwood and the chemical tang of tattoo ink that never quite washed out of his clothes. The same sunken couch. The same corkboard covered in sketches. The same sense of safety that wrapped around me the moment I stepped through the door.

I collapsed onto the couch—my couch, the one I'd claimed years ago—and let my head fall back against the cushions.

"Beer?" Tui asked, already heading for the kitchen.

"Please."

He returned with two bottles, the cheap kind we'd been drinking since we were barely legal, and handed one to me. The glass was cold against my palm. I pressed it to my forehead for a moment, letting the chill seep into my skin, before cracking it open.

"Food?" Tui settled into the armchair across from me, his own beer in hand. "I can order something."

"Whatever you want." I didn't have the energy to make decisions. Didn't have the energy for anything except sitting here, drinking this beer, and trying not to think about the afternoon.

Tui pulled out his phone and tapped through an order—something from the Thai place down the street, probably, the one that knew us by name and always threw in extra spring rolls. I watched him without really seeing, my mind still stuck in that hallway, staring at that closed door.

"Hey."

I blinked. Tui was looking at me, his phone lowered, his expression soft with concern.

"You're somewhere else." he said.

"I know." I took a long pull of my beer. It was bitter, not quite cold enough, exactly what I needed. "I'm trying to come back."

"Take your time."

The food arrived eventually.

Pad thai and green curry and those spring rolls I'd predicted, spread out on Tui's coffee table like a feast. We ate in companionable silence, the TV playing something neither of us was watching—some reality show about people renovating houses or finding love or whatever it was that passed for entertainment. I managed half my pad thai before my appetite gave out. The noodles sat heavy in my stomach, mixing uneasily with the beer and the grief.

"It's okay." Tui said, noticing me push the container away. "You don't have to finish."

"I know." I pulled my knees up to my chest, making myself small. "I just..." I didn't finish the sentence. I didn't know how.

But Tui nodded like he understood anyway.

The second beer went down easier than the first.

We'd switched to music now—something soft and instrumental, the kind of ambient playlist Tui always put on when he was working late. It filled the apartment with gentle noise, smoothing over the sharp edges of silence.

I was half-watching the TV, half-watching Tui. He'd pulled out a sketchbook at some point, settling into the armchair with his pencil moving in slow, careful strokes. Drawing something. I couldn't see what from this angle, but the focus on his face was familiar. Calming.

Then I noticed the flowers.

They sat on the small table by the window—a bright, cheerful arrangement in a mason jar that definitely hadn't come from Tui. Sunflowers and daisies and something purple I couldn't name, all spilling over each other in artful chaos. Lego's work. It had to be.

I stared at the flowers, and something twisted in my chest. Not jealousy, exactly. Something more complicated. Guilt, maybe. Shame.

I still hadn't apologized to Lego. For that day in William's apartment, when I'd sat there in silence while William dismissed him. For being so wrapped up in my own wanting that I'd failed to see someone else's pain.

The memory of Lego's face—bright and hopeful, carrying those ridiculous beautiful flowers—flickered through my mind. And then William's sharp urgency: I'm busy right now. Can we reschedule?

I'd let it happen. I'd been complicit.

And now here I was, crying over my own broken heart, while Lego's flowers sat on Tui's windowsill like a quiet accusation. I should ask. Should say something. Should find out how Lego was doing, whether he was okay, whether the damage I'd witnessed had healed.

But the words stuck in my throat.

Not tonight, I told myself. Tomorrow. I'll ask tomorrow.

It was a coward's excuse, and I knew it. But I was too tired, too hollowed out, too fragile to add another weight to the pile. So I kept my thoughts to myself and turned my attention back to the TV, where someone was crying about a kitchen renovation gone wrong.

The tears came without warning.

One moment I was staring at the screen, not really seeing anything. The next, my vision blurred and my chest seized and suddenly I was crying again, silent sobs shaking my shoulders.

Tui was there immediately.

He didn't say anything. Just set down his sketchbook, crossed to the couch, and sat down beside me. He pulled a tissue from the box on the coffee table—the box that was always there, I realized, like he kept it stocked specifically for moments like this—and pressed it gently into my hand.

"Here." he murmured.

I pressed the tissue to my face, trying to stem the flow, but it was useless. Everything I'd been holding back all afternoon came pouring out—the hurt, the confusion, the desperate, stupid hope that had been crushed under William's retreat.

"I thought—" I choked on the words. "He said he wanted to try. He said that, Tui. And then he just—"

"I know."

"I don't understand." I wiped my eyes, but more tears came to replace them. "How can someone say that and then just shut down? How can he let me in that far and then push me out like I'm nothing?"

"He's scared." Tui's voice was gentle. "That doesn't make it okay. But it's the reason."

"I'm scared too." The admission came out ragged. "I was terrified to go there this morning. Terrified of what it would feel like to see him again. But I showed up anyway. I didn't run."

"No, you didn't."

"So why couldn't he—" I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes. "Why am I never enough for people to stay?"

Tui was quiet for a long moment. Then he reached out and pulled me against his shoulder, the same way he'd done a hundred times before.

"You're enough." he said firmly. "You've always been enough. This isn't about your worth, Est. It's about his capacity. He's not capable of staying right now. That's his limitation, not yours."

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to take those words and wrap them around myself like armor.

But all I could feel was the hollow ache where hope used to be.

Eventually, the tears subsided.

I stayed leaning against Tui's shoulder, too exhausted to move. He didn't seem to mind. Just sat there, solid and warm, one hand rubbing slow circles on my back.

"Better?" he asked finally.

"No." I laughed weakly. "But less actively falling apart."

"That counts."

I pulled back, reaching for another tissue to mop up the mess of my face. My eyes felt swollen, my nose was running, and I probably looked like a disaster. But Tui just looked at me with that same patient expression, no judgment, no pity.

"I'm going to draw for a while." he said. "You can keep watching trash TV. Or sleep, if

you can."

"What are you drawing?"

He tilted his sketchbook toward me, and I saw it—the flowers. Lego's flowers, rendered in careful pencil strokes, petals and stems and the particular chaos of a Lego arrangement.

Something shifted in my chest.

"They're beautiful." I said quietly.

"Lego brought them yesterday." Tui's voice was soft.

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

There was so much I didn't know. So much I'd missed while I was lost in my own spiral. Lego was here, growing, healing, building something with Tui and Hong. Life had been moving forward while I stood still.

"I should apologize to him." I said finally. "For... before. At William's."

Tui's pencil paused. "When you're ready."

"I know."

He resumed drawing, and I turned back to the TV.

The reality show had given way to some late-night comedy program, all bright colors and laugh tracks. I watched without absorbing any of it, my mind drifting.

God, I would have preferred to fall in love with someone like Tui.

The thought surfaced from somewhere deep, unbidden and startling.

Not Tui specifically—I didn't feel that way about him, and he didn't feel that way about me. But someone like him. Someone steady. Someone who showed up. Someone who didn't run at the first sign of vulnerability, who didn't retreat into silence when things got hard, who didn't make you feel like loving them was a mistake.

William was a storm. Beautiful and devastating and impossible to hold onto.

Tui was solid ground. The place you came back to when the storm passed.

I needed solid ground. I'd always needed it. But I kept falling for storms.

Maybe that's the problem, I thought drowsily. Maybe I'm addicted to the chaos because I don't know how to trust the calm.

The thought felt too big to examine right now. Too complicated for my exhausted brain.

So I pushed it aside and let my eyes drift closed, listening to the scratch of Tui's pencil and the low murmur of the TV.

Sleep came slowly, then all at once.

One moment I was hovering on the edge of consciousness, thoughts still circling. The next, I was sinking into darkness, warm and soft and mercifully empty. In my dreams, there was no William. No closed doors. No professional emails or broken promises.

Just silence. Just peace. Just the fleeting illusion of a world where I could be myself without being judged. Without being abandoned. Without being too much.

I slept.

And for a few hours, at least, the hurt couldn't find me.